

place is crammed like a micro Manhattan with abandoned multi-story buildings, looking blasted out and yet still standing as if they'd weathered a neutron bomb attack rather than Nagasaki's devastated, atom-bombed WWII landscapes, debris spread everywhere as if a giant child had run the place for hours. What could this island possibly be, what purpose could it have served? The tension between the viewer's instinct for searching out the facts behind the images on view and the fiction provided on the soundtrack is especially dramatic, as the text goes to great lengths to describe the making of a chronicle (found "floating for 400 years") about Kanzennashima by its only inhabitant, one Tadashi Harai, alternately described by the curator as having washed ashore as a castaway in one of the floods, as being a self-described madman, and also as a figure who may never have existed. This forms the basis for *Slow Action's* consideration of what utopia may be, with the narrator quoting Harai, in a Borgesian literary loop in which a fiction is citing another fiction: "Utopia can only be approached, never reached. Utopia can't be known in the future, nor in the present. Utopia is in the past, not a past as a golden age, but a past as ruins of its own ruins," marking out a territory where "entropy is moving against itself" and where "we are our own visitors and ghosts" and "we survive among the elements of our own demise."

Finally, at Somerset (filmed on an unidentified British island that looks, at points, curiously tropical), Rivers reaches an actually living social entity, with bodies—albeit ones hidden behind sackcloths and sinister-looking wooden masks whose fierce opacity suggests a crude warrior society built on survival of the fittest, a dark side of the Darwinian world. While Rivers films the previous three utopias in long and medium shots with an eye he has developed over the past eight years for landscapes and natural features, his camera approaches the Somerset tribe in closer portrait shots, sometimes recalling the visual language of TV war correspondents who've reached the encampments of guerilla armies and gained their trust. In this world, the one where *Slow Action* ends, a Trotskyist state of permanent revolution is maintained with tribal cohesion. ♦

Los Angeles Filmforum is the city's longest-running organization dedicated to weekly screenings of experimental film, documentaries, video art, and experimental animation. 2025 is our 50th year.

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Coming soon to Acropolis

- *Bogancloch* (Dir. Ben Rivers, 2024)—Los Angeles premiere, September 30 at 2220 Arts + Archives, with Rivers in person
- *When the Sun Is Eaten (Chi'bal K'iin)* + *Polly Two: Eclipse* films by Kevin Jerome Everson (Dir. Kevin Jerome Everson, 2025/2018)—Los Angeles premieres, October 20 at 2220 Arts + Archives, with Everson in person

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

Urthworks is a trilogy of films by Ben Rivers imagining the future of a planet at three stages after environmental collapse. Working with 16mm film and digital imaging technology, Rivers captures extraordinary real locations in Japan, Tuvalu, Lanzarote, Arizona, the Mendip Hills, and Somerset as well as fabricated environments. Observational images are interspersed with fantastically costumed characters and uncanny ruins. Through these eerily resonant threads, Rivers forges a compelling blend of document and fiction which presents us with forgotten ideas of the future, stranger-than-fiction images of the present, and elemental visions of the distant future that seem to resemble the deep past. While epic in scope, the narrative that unfolds is shaped around tactile and human detail, suggesting an intimate, sensory account of vast transformations in society and nature.

TRT: 82 min

In person: Ben Rivers

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Urthworks by Timotheus Vermeulen

The following article was originally published by Artforum, November 2021

The title of Ben Rivers’s film trilogy *Urthworks* collapses references to Urth, the Norse goddess of the past, and *Earthworks*, Brian Aldiss’s 1965 novel about a postapocalyptic future. This dialectic between mythical history and quirky speculative scenarios drives all three of Rivers’s films, which were produced in collaboration with the writer Mark von Schlegell. All 16-mm film transferred to digital, the films play one after the other like a carousel designed by Gramsci and Peter Pan: pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will, and some other crazy stuff. Clocking in at forty-five minutes, the longest of the films, *Slow Action*, 2010, takes a pseudodocumentary look at four fictional island communities that remain after rising sea levels have triggered global flooding. While the narrative structure of each case study pairs an encyclopedic sequence of images with an anthropological voice-over, the aesthetics differ significantly from site to site. Rivers juxtaposes deliberately grainy footage with crisp imagery in heightened color, shifting between intimate and close-cropped handheld shots and extreme long pans that survey abandoned modernist ruins, new indigenous symbolism, familiar everyday households, and masked mystical tribes. In the nineteen-minute *Urth*, 2016, a single woman details her increasingly dire yet revelatory (or hallucinatory) experiences in a dilapidated glass biosphere long after Earth’s atmosphere has become toxic. The images blur, increasingly out of focus as the reports waver. The twenty-two-minute *Look Then Below*, 2019, offers a mesmerizing account of a long-lost civilization that existed below the surface of our planet. The visuals are stunning: alternately superimposed, enhanced, and color-coded, they describe a world as magical as it is suffocating. Together, these films capture the decline of one world and the rise of a multitude of others. ♦

Slow Action by Robert Koehler

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Cinema Scope 49, Winter 2011

Slow Action is a collaboration between Rivers and speculative fiction writer Mark von Schlegell, whose ironic attitudes toward utopia were formed when he lived in Los Angeles, before moving to Cologne. This is the first time that Rivers has worked with an author, and the result is something new and important for cinema. Von Schlegell contributes an epic fiction based on the chronicling of island utopias by an unnamed curator of the “Great Encyclopedia,” created after what appears to be at least a fourth global flooding in what may be a variation of the setting of *Waterworld* (1995). Two unidentified narrators, one male speaking in a clear, North American-inflected voice and one female, speaking in a heavy accent that deliberately muddies comprehension, alternate delivery of the four encyclopedic entries, written with the kind of maniacal attention to detail that recalls the hilarious third-person, BBC-mocking narrations that ran through (among others) Greenaway’s *Windows* (1975), *Vertical Features Remake* (1978), and *The Falls* (1980), as well as Herzog’s *Fata Morgana* (1971), films that also deployed the grammar of documentary to spin wild fictions. (The four great floods share a common disaster-culture bond with Greenaway’s avian “Violent Unknown Event” in *The Falls*.)

Sir Thomas More launched the British obsession with utopias and alternative societies—the more geographically remote, the better—but whereas More intended Utopia to offer a critique of the present, *Slow Action* (taken from a phrase by Darwin, one of Rivers’ heroes and whose centenary was the project’s genesis) is a mysterious elegy of a future not yet here which also feels and looks already decayed and collapsed. The island of Eleven (occupied by the Elevenians, and filmed on Lanzarote) looks like the moon, where the typically naked inhabitants are only briefly viewed through a reflective pool of water, the ruins of their civilization standing as a stark reminder of the temporality of all human habitation, and the ways in which traces of past civilizations are eventually buried by geologic time—a theme proposed with authority by geologist Jan Zalsiewicz in Rivers’ quasi-travelogue, *I Know Where I’m Going* (2009).

Hiva Island, part of the Society Islands chain in what appears to be the South Pacific (Rivers filmed this, under what looks like extremely difficult conditions, on Tuvalu), is described visually and aurally in quite paradoxical terms. On one hand, Rivers’ pictures, marinated in the visual grammar of anthropological cinema, portray a poverty-infested place festooned with mountains of garbage amidst a paradisaal ecology, and people (mostly in family groups) living in extreme isolation. The Great Encyclopedia narration, on the other hand, describes a culture embracing storytelling (“society life is particularly novelistic”) and ruled by “an imperial government with a High Chief and High Council,” in which “war and foreign invasion are rare” but which is also marbled with a clubby bureaucracy embracing “debauchery” and governing an archipelago featuring everything from feudal lords to communist social enclaves, where suicide is the preferred mode of death.

The most melancholic and perhaps unforgettable section is the third, set on Kanzennashima Island (filmed on land and in a boat off of an artificially created islet, Gunkanamija, adjacent to Nagasaki), a strange, Alcatraz-like hulk, rimmed with a high concrete wall and clearly meant to recall a decayed Tower of Babel—itsself an image associated with More’s *Utopia*. The